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Facing the data on *face*: Investigating the claims of Lexical Priming with respect to polysemy

This paper will focus on the claims of Lexical Priming (LP) with respect to polysemy, viz. that the collocations, semantic associations and colligations that a polysemous word is characteristically primed for will systematically differentiate its various senses, and that the different senses will avoid use of each other's primings (Hoey 2005: 81, 82).

The paper will explore these claims on the basis of the verb *face*. An examination of a corpus of fiction texts drawn from the BNC shows that *face* has visual and non-visual uses. The non-visual uses feature abstract *face*, e.g. *face challenges/problems/consequences*, and have a purely confrontational meaning. The visual uses encompass a purely directional sense of *face*, as in *coasts that face north*; *The two other machines face him*. The data on both the purely confrontational and the purely directional sense appear to support the claims of LP with respect to polysemy. But in the vast majority of cases the visual uses depart from the purely directional sense and involve an additional level of meaning, e.g.:

(1)   nearest and dearest." She had turned to **face** him. There was neither vehemence in her voice
(2)   This was yet another of his children to **face** him in defiance in this very kitchen.
(3)   not realise then that Rioja had stayed to **face** the killers. From the hut behind them

In these cases, we have more than a mere statement of the characters' physical position. In contexts of discourse, as in (1)-(2), there is a default expectation that the interlocutors will be looking at each other –or at least be face-to-face, so that establishing eye-contact would be a matter of split seconds–, as this is what daily experience of interaction with people in our western culture has taught us to expect. There is apparently something in the situation that makes an explicit mention of one character's positioning with respect to another particularly interesting or important. In cases like (3) there are strong lexical clues to point the reader towards a directional interpretation of *face* with a predominating confrontational element.

Whether such visual uses of *face* are to be interpreted as containing an element of confrontation or not is, however, not always a straightforward matter. The paper will therefore explore:

· in how far contextual clues are present that guide the reader in an interpretation of *face*;

· in how far such clues diverge from those already covered by LP;

· whether such clues indeed avoid the primings of the purely directional and purely confrontational uses;

· whether the reader should be accorded a more active role in the interpretation of what they read than they have been granted within the framework of LP.

Reference

Hoey, M. 2005. *Lexical Priming. A New Theory of Words and Language*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.